Developments

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Alberta Highlights From the 2004 Canadian Addiction Survey

What are the prevalence and patterns of use of alcohol and illicit drugs among Albertans? What harm is suffered as a result of this use? What do Albertans think of the various methods by which addictions workers strive to reduce use and reduce harm from use? What do they think of government policies that address substance use issues? To what extent are Albertans aware of existing and potential approaches to reducing harm?

The answers to those questions have been drawn by AADAC researchers from the Alberta data in the June 2005 release of the full data set of the Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS). This issue focuses on what the data show about Albertans' use of alcohol and of cannabis and other illicit drugs, and about their views on and knowledge of addiction issues.

The full *Canadian Addiction Survey 2004: Alberta Report* will be posted on the AADAC website by late February. The executive summary is already available, as are the two brief profiles *Alcohol Use in Alberta* and *Illicit Drug Use in Alberta*, both drawn from the CAS.

To be effective, addictions agencies must suit their policies, the information they issue, and their education, prevention and treatment efforts to the population they serve. To do this, we periodically need a picture of that population, and the CAS provides one such snapshot.

Major impetus for the CAS came from an organization that has been quietly working to influence policy and action on substance use issues across Canada since 2002. By uniting the efforts of senior executives of provincial and federal addictions agencies, the Canadian Executive Council on Addictions (CECA) played a key role in getting the survey off the ground, enlisting (in addition to the work of member agencies) the support of the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, Health Canada, and the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and British Columbia.

The CAS is only the third national survey focusing on alcohol and other drug use by the Canadian population in general, and *Developments* applauds the efforts of all involved to fill the knowledge gap left after Canada's Alcohol and Other Drug Survey in 1994.

The Canadian Addiction Survey

By Ed Sawka, AADAC Senior Director of National Research Coordination

What is the CAS?

The Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS) is a nationwide telephone survey of Canadians (aged 15 years and up) about the use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs, harm related to substance use, and public opinion on issues and policy options related to the use of alcohol and other drugs. The CAS is a timely follow-up to previously conducted surveys: the 1989 National Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey and the 1994 Canada's Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey.

A total of 13,909 Canadians completed the Canadian Addiction Survey including 2,401 Albertans. The sample was drawn from the ten provinces only; the territories were excluded because of the unique features of northern communities.

How will CAS information be used?

Information from population-based surveys like the CAS serves a variety of purposes. The CAS Alberta Report provides a snapshot of the characteristics, behaviour and opinions of Albertans aged 15 and older on a range of issues related to the use of alcohol and illicit drugs. Information collected through repeated studies allows us to monitor trends and changes in patterns in alcohol and illicit drug use, related harm and public opinion. This is vital to program planners and policy-makers as they strive to carefully match their work to the characteristics, needs, and community context of their client group or target audience. For example, AADAC planners have used information gleaned from the CAS to inform the development of prevention and harm-reduction programs designed to target high-risk drinking among young adults.

Who was involved in CAS?

The CAS is a collaborative undertaking sponsored by Health Canada, the Canadian Executive Council on Addictions, the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, and the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and British Columbia. CECA consists of the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Prince Edward Island Provincial Health Services Authority, and the Kaiser Foundation.

Will there be another CAS?

The current study filled a 10-year gap in information on alcohol and other drugs in Canada. Discussion has begun among the national partners to maintain their dynamic relationship and to develop a sustainable and timelier approach to population surveillance research. This will likely involve using a number of approaches, including surveys modelled after the CAS.

Where can I read more about the CAS?

To learn more about the Canadian Addiction Survey, please visit the AADAC website and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) website.

Several reports based on the CAS that have been completed or are in preparation are listed

below.

- *Canadian Addiction Survey 2004: Alberta Report, Executive Summary* (May 2005)
- *Canadian Addiction Survey 2004: Alberta Report, Final Report* (drafted in October 2005, currently in press)
- *Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS), Prevalence of Use and Related Harms, Highlights* (November 2004)
- *Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS), Prevalence of Use and Related Harms, Detailed Report* (March 2005)
- *Canadian Addiction Survey (CAS), A National Survey of Canadians' Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs: Public Opinion, Attitudes and Knowledge* (in press)

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Alcohol and Illicit Drugs: Prevalence, Patterns and Harm

By Christie Malcolm, AADAC Research Officer

How many Albertans drink alcohol?

Most Albertans surveyed (93.6%) reported using alcohol at least once during their lifetime and about four out of five Albertans (79.5%) reported having used alcohol during the 12 months before the survey.

Percentage of Albertans (Aged 15 Years and Up) Reporting the Use of Alcohol, Cannabis and Other Illicit Drugs at Least Once During Their Lifetime or the Past Year

Figure 1

How many drinkers in Alberta are heavy drinkers?

In the CAS 2004 Alberta sample, 6.0% of past-year drinkers reported heavy (or "binge") drinking on a weekly basis and 26.5% on a monthly basis. (Heavy drinking as commonly defined is the consumption of five or more alcoholic drinks on a single occasion for men, and four or more on a single occasion for women.)

About one in five past-year drinkers in Alberta (19.1%) scored in the "high-risk" range for drinking.[1] This corresponds to an estimate of 13.7% to 16.6% of all Albertans engaging in high-risk drinking during 2004.

How many drinkers in Alberta experience harm as a result of their alcohol use?

Respondents who reported using alcohol at least once in their lifetime were asked about any harmful effects that drinking might have had on their major life areas. Among lifetime drinkers in Alberta, 28.6% reported harm to at least one life area at some point during their lifetime and 9.5% of past-year drinkers reported harm to at least one life area during the year before the survey.

What types of harm do drinkers in Alberta suffer as a result of their alcohol use?

The type of alcohol-related harm most commonly experienced by drinkers was harm to physical health (17.5% lifetime harm, 6.0% past-year harm), followed closely by harm to friendships or social life (17.3% lifetime harm, 3.5% past-year harm), then harm to their home life or marriage (9.8% lifetime harm, 2.4% past-year harm).

How many Albertans use illicit drugs?

By far the most commonly reported illicit drug used by Albertans over the age of 15 during their lifetime and the past year was cannabis with almost half of those sampled (48.7%) reporting use at some point during their lifetime and 15.4% reporting use in the year before the survey. About one in five Albertans surveyed (19.7%) reported the use of an illicit drug other than cannabis during their lifetime (3.5% in the past year). Of these, cocaine/crack and hallucinogens were the most commonly reported drugs used by Albertans during their lifetime, both reported by 12.3% of those surveyed. Cocaine was the illicit drug, other than cannabis, most commonly used during the year before the survey (2.4% of Albertans).

How many illicit drug users in Alberta demonstrate the need for intervention regarding their use?

About one in five Albertans (22.1%) who reported the use of cannabis during the previous three months scored in the low-risk range of the ASSIST scale, indicating no need for intervention. The remaining respondents who reported the use of cannabis during the previous three months (77.9%) scored in the moderate- or high-risk ranges of the ASSIST scale,

indicating the need for intervention. For users of illicit drugs other than cannabis, just over one-third (37.6%[2]) scored in the low-risk range of the ASSIST scale and 62.4% scored in the moderate- or high-risk ranges.[3]

How many illicit drug users in Alberta experience harm as a result of their illicit drug use?

About one-quarter (26.1%) of lifetime illicit drug users reported harm in at least one life area as a result of their drug use and 18.4% of past-year users experienced harm related to their use in at least one life area during the year before the survey.

What kinds of harm do illicit drug users in Alberta suffer as a result of their drug use?

As with alcohol use, physical health was the life area that reportedly suffered the most harm from illicit drug use over the course of the lifetime (15.9% of users) and during the year before the survey (10.9%). Friendships and social life were the life area next most likely to have been harmed (13.1% lifetime harm, 5.8% past-year harm[2]) followed by respondents' employment or studies (9.6% lifetime harm, 5.1% past-year harm[2]).

To learn more about the Alberta results of the Canadian Addiction Survey, please visit the AADAC website.

Endnotes

1. An AUDIT score of eight or more was used to indicate harmful alcohol use or possible alcohol dependence. The AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test) is a 10-item questionnaire used to identify hazardous or harmful drinking. For more information about the AUDIT, see T. R. Babor, J. C. Higgins-Biddle, J. B. Saunders, and M. G. Monteiro (2001), *The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test: Guidelines for use in primary care* (2nd ed.), published by the World Health Organization in Geneva.

2. These figures are based on a low number of respondents. Caution must be used in generalizing to the whole population of Alberta.

3. The World Health Organization (WHO) Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST) estimates the need for intervention associated with cannabis use and the use of illicit drugs other than cannabis separately. For more information about the ASSIST, see the article "Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST): Development, Reliability and Feasibility" (WHO ASSIST Working Group, [2002], in the journal *Addiction*, Volume 97, Issue 9, pages 1183 to 1194).

Public Opinion Related to Alcohol and Illicit Drug Use

By Kathy Huebert, AADAC Research Officer

What is public opinion in Alberta on the seriousness of alcohol and illicit drug abuse?

Albertans generally view alcohol abuse and illicit drug abuse as serious issues whether considering it in Canada, in Alberta or in their own community. Women were more likely than men to view alcohol abuse and illicit drug abuse as serious in Alberta and in their own

communities.

What is public opinion in Alberta on increasing taxes on alcoholic beverages?

Just under two-thirds (61.1%) of Albertans thought taxes on alcoholic beverages should remain the same; 25.7% favoured increasing taxes and 13.2% supported lowering taxes.

What is public opinion in Alberta on raising the legal drinking age?

Albertans' opinions were split about half and half between leaving the legal drinking age at 18 years (48.7%) and raising it (45.7%). Three per cent thought the legal drinking age should be lowered. At present, the legal drinking age is 18 in Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec. In the rest of the provinces, the legal drinking age is 19 years of age.

What is public opinion in Alberta on random police spot-checks to catch drinking drivers?

The vast majority of Albertans (97.1%) agreed with random police spot-checks to catch drinking drivers. Women were more likely than men to support the spot-checks.

What is public opinion in Alberta of privatizing alcohol sales?

Almost two-thirds (62.7%) of Albertans agreed that the provincial government was right in closing all government-run liquor stores and allowing privately run stores to sell alcohol. This is significantly higher than the national finding of 32.6% in favour of closing government-run liquor stores.[1]

What is public opinion in Alberta about drug policy programs?

CAS respondents were asked about four ways of dealing with illicit drug abuse: methadone maintenance, needle exchange, harm reduction strategies, and drug treatment courts. Albertans were most familiar with needle exchange programs: 84.8% reported that they had heard about them. Over two-thirds of all respondents supported each of the four approaches.

What is public opinion in Alberta about government actions to reduce substance use and consequences?

Albertans generally favoured drug treatment and harm reduction efforts as well as legal action against illicit drug abuse. As shown in the figure, the vast majority (97.1%) agreed that drug treatment programs should be available. There was also very strong agreement for government pursuing legal action against sellers of illicit drugs (96%) and against illicit drug users (80%). Further, there was substantial agreement for programs offering clean needles or drug kits (76.7%) and health programs to reduce harm without requiring users to stop consuming illicit drugs (61.5%). One notable exception was that there was considerable disagreement with providing night shelters for people who are homeless without requiring users to stop consuming alcohol and illicit drugs.

Albertans' Agreement With Government Actions to Reduce Use and Consequences of Illicit Drug Abuse

Figure 2

What is public opinion in Alberta about cannabis issues and policy options?

Albertans were almost evenly divided on the question of whether possessing small amounts of cannabis should be illegal: slightly more favoured keeping it illegal than indicated that it should not be illegal (52.6% versus 47.4%).

Three-quarters (74.6%) of Albertans reported that they had heard about the Government of Canada's proposed legislation to change the penalty for possession of 15 grams or less of cannabis from a criminal sanction to a fine only. Of all respondents, just over half of Albertans (58.4%) indicated they supported such a change in legislation.

To learn more about the Alberta results of the Canadian Addiction Survey, please visit the AADAC website.

Endnote

1. The survey question on government-run liquor stores was worded differently for Albertans from the question for the other provinces. Albertans were asked whether the government "was right" in closing all government-run liquor stores, reflecting the shift to private-sector retailing of alcohol by the Alberta government in 1993 to 1994. The other provinces were asked whether the government "should close" all government-run liquor stores.

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RESOURCES

Alberta Drug Strategy

In November 2004, AADAC released the Alberta Drug Strategy, a strategy that takes advantage of AADAC's cross-provincial presence to combine the efforts of provincial government ministries, health workers, community agencies, and interested citizens (including the community drug coalitions that have sprung up across the province) to prevent and reduce the harm caused by the use of alcohol and other drugs.

To review the highlights of the strategy, please see the Alberta Drug Strategy Information Sheet.

The strategy's framework is described in greater detail in the report, Alberta Drug Strategy: A Framework for Action on Alcohol and Other Drug Use.

Tobacco Reduction DVD

As a former fashion model, 41-year-old Barb Tarbox knew that she was a role model to many young people. She also knew that she was dying of terminal lung cancer, and that smoking had caused her disease. She spent several of the last months of her life speaking to students across Alberta and Canada to warn them of the dangers of smoking. The video *Barb Tarbox: A Life Cut Short by Tobacco* captured the spirit and passion with which she infused her

presentations. That video is now available on DVD.

The DVD includes a short discussion guide to help tobacco reduction counsellors, teachers, youth leaders and others lead a discussion about making decisions about smoking. Albertans may borrow the DVD through their local AADAC office. It may also be purchased for $99 plus GST and $8 shipping and handling.

TO ORDER AADAC RESOURCES: For residents of Alberta, small quantities of most AADAC resources are available free of charge through your nearest AADAC office. Within North America, order through our online catalogue, order by regular post, or call toll-free 1-800-280-9616. To order from outside of North America, call 780-427-7319, send orders by regular post, or e-mail us at rdm@aadac.gov.ab.ca. Our postal address is

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For further information, please see our Ordering FAQ.

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